



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Dancing to the rhythm of the music

Citation for published version:

Dobson, N 2015, 'Dancing to the rhythm of the music: Norman McLaren and the performing body', *Animation Studies*, vol. 10, pp. 1-10. <<https://journal.animationstudies.org/nichola-dobson-dancing-to-rhythm-of-the-music-norman-mclaren-the-body-and-performance/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Animation Studies

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Nichola Dobson

Dancing to the Rhythm of the Music – Norman McLaren, the Body and Performance

On *Begone Dull Care*: “Thus, the knife-point was made to slide and move on the surface of the film; my hand pressed, guided, and, as it were, made to ‘dance’ to the rhythm of the music.”
(McLaren 1949, p.6)

Scottish-Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren’s work is bound by the notion of performance; he described his own animation process in those terms, while using performance as both subject and animated object. He is well known for his creation of ‘animated music’ using his cameraless animation techniques, while also combining his love of dance to create innovative abstract films. Building on previous research and forming part of a larger project on McLaren’s legacy, this paper will examine in two halves McLaren’s interest in the movement of the body. The first will look at his use of the body indirectly by using the physical body as an animation tool for stop motion, with the second examining how the body connects to performance directly by filming dance performances. By considering key texts including *Neighbours* (1952), *A Chairy Tale* (1957), *Pas de Deux* (1968), and *Narcisuss* (1983), I will consider the extent to which McLaren’s work did indeed contribute to “a new genre of filmic ballet and mime” (McLaren 1952, p. 84).

Considering performance

Performance theory is a vast subject in itself and though I will draw on its various aspects in this paper, it is by no means intended to be exhaustive. The subject extends from theatre and dance, the verbal performance, politics and through latterly to film and animation. For my purposes I engage with some of the most relevant to this topic. The first section of the paper will consider performance itself before moving on to chosen examples of McLaren’s work. There are five key areas from performance theory which will be examined initially in terms of performance generally and then more specifically with regards to McLaren’s films; agency, actor/character/performer, movement, audience/place/projection.

Agency

The first of these, agency, is connected to the others, but is largely the determining factor in the performance; that is, who is in control and deciding what the performance is and does. Agency might be situated in the movement of the actor as devised by the director, the dancer by the choreographer, the character by the animator, or looking at issues such as the politics of the performance, in Butler’s performative voice (2004). In animation, it would initially seem that agency is in the hands of the director over the inanimate (puppet or drawing) but as Laura Ivins-Hulley (2008) suggests, the audience itself has a kind of agency in that it views and ultimately accepts (or does not) the performance which is being viewed.

Animated Actor/character/performer

Paul Wells’s oft-cited *Understanding Animation* describes the animator becoming an actor through the creation of the character (1998, p. 107), which Kim Walden (2008) suggests can be combined with the voice acting and argues that the “collaborative nature” (n.p.) of the entire

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

animation process, which includes all animation personnel and voice talent, must be considered when discussing the overall performance. The existence of an often well-known voice over actor problematizes much of the animated actor's performance, particularly when as Walden (and others; see in particular Floquet, 2011) suggests that the 'reality' of the actor can potentially clash with the immersion of the audience into the character's performance. The audience may have to suspend belief between an animated performance and the familiar live action one. The notion of agency can also be connected directly to the actor, with the performance often at the mercy of their interpretation of the words or choreography set for them – they will have their own agency driving them and unless they are at the mercy of the editor/director in a recorded mediated performance they will retain that control.

Movement

The movement in the performance is often overlooked in terms of the larger experience. I have suggested that the performer or director can influence and have agency over the performance, as well as the audience, but the movement itself is interesting when broken down into smaller increments. Laura Cull (2009) examines the "arithmetic of rhythm" (p. 240) by considering Gilles Deleuze's notion of looking at dance in terms of miniscule movements affected by kinetics, with the body as a performative tool, which can react with or against physical laws. The body is not moving alone, however, as the movement around the body must also be considered. As Cull notes, the

intersection between the productive components of a movement simultaneously produces the expressive form of a step, but also a continuous emerging difference in between the steps; harmonic precision and subtle definition being the effect of chaotic subterranean jittering, trembling and proliferation of movements in all directions. (p. 244)

Interestingly, Cull is suggesting (after Deleuze) that there is much to examine between the movements, just as McLaren often talked of what was 'between the frames' of animation. This is where the performance is happening and, by using the body in this way, Cull suggests we can essentially compare the choreographer to a puppeteer manipulating the body (p. 247).

Audience/Place/Projection

Much like in genre, the audience would seem to be of great importance in performance. Donald Crafton talks about the role of the audience in his important work *Shadow of a Mouse* (2013), suggesting as Ivins-Hulley does, that the audience must accept the performance in order for it to succeed. In the case of theatrical performances of plays and dance this may seem fairly straightforward – the actor/dancer plays a role which the audience 'buys into.' This can be extended into live action cinema but in animation the issues of realism can alter the expectations. [\[i\]](#) In addition to audience acceptance, both Crafton and Philip Auslander (2009) also refer to the actual viewing of the performance, particularly if the performance has been recorded. The temporal shift between the recording and viewing will have an effect on the audience's understanding and perhaps appreciation of the piece. Historical context will be of great importance to how it is viewed, often affected by what we know of the performer, director or circumstance of the performance as to how it is read.

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

The method of capturing the performance whether by film, or digital technology can also affect the reception of the performance. Is a film being shown on a television, which has a smaller screen ratio or quality, or indeed on a mobile device? Is the sound synchronised correctly? These types of question should be considered when looking at repeated recorded performances. Crafton and Auslander both suggest that this is essentially a ‘reactivation’ of a performance. The screen complicates the performance and this is where some of the traditional performance theory ceases to be of use here.

The animated performance

Crafton’s recent text *Shadow of a Mouse* (2013) takes an historical approach to early studio animation in the US and indeed attempts to discover how these films are viewed and accepted (and whether they are ultimately successful, by considering the performance). Crafton notes, that though there are a few animation scholars looking at this, there are still many gaps to cover. Of key interest is his notion that animation performance can be considered either ‘of’ or ‘in’ animation. He argues that all performance can be broken down into these two, suggesting that performance ‘in’ animation concerns the characters and movements within the film (this is later further broken down in to figurative and embodied performances) and performance ‘of’ animation which concerns the filmmakers and audiences (p.17-18). These two concepts can be applied to any animation (or indeed arguably film or television text) to describe the ways in which the performance is displayed and viewed.

In an animated film, the character is not treated in the same way as an actor or dancer in live action – they are not performing in the sense of following direction, reading lines or using their own knowledge and motivation (or agency) to perform; this is where Well’s notion of the animator becoming the character becomes significant – animators create/direct/manipulate the character and as such use their own knowledge (of acting) to perform the part. The audience is generally aware of this artifice but goes along with the success of the performance (and narrative) to accept the character. Ivins-Hulley (2009) reinforces this idea, and further suggests that while we know that the characters (referring to stop motion puppets) are not alive, the “performance carries a paradoxical indexicality: the puppet tangibly exists outside the film, but its movement does not” (n.p.). Here, the puppets’ performance is ‘in’ animation and though we are aware of the animator we are looking at the movement within the film. We are able to read the indexical signs, which relate to our own and can understand the meaning. Where we start to consider the animator’s work (or indeed the role of the audience) we are looking at the performance ‘of’ animation. These points are crucial to the analysis of the McLaren films I will be focussing on. Looking at several examples of his dance films we can see how Crafton’s terms “of” and “in” will be appropriate.

McLaren, dance and the body

McLaren was known to be a fan of dance and had said that he would have liked to be a dancer. Instead he created wonderful films featuring dance such as *Pas de Deux* and *Narcisuss*, among others. He also created several films using live action footage, essentially animating the body, and using pixilation, to create a different kind of performance (*Neighbours* and *A Chairy Tale*). This section will look at both types of performance while considering some of the theoretical terms introduced in the section on performance above. McLaren used camera-less

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

techniques in many of his films, and the title of this paper refers to his own approach to filmmaking and how he felt about it. This connects to some of his work with sound, as he inherently felt the rhythm of the movement that he was creating. Though Crafton is largely discussing figurative work, he states that McLaren “succeeded in getting moving lines scratched onto film to ‘act’ kinesthetically in *Begone Dull Care*” (p.56) The performance ‘of’ McLaren’s animating here becomes a character ‘in’ the animation; he even describes the act of animating in performance terms. When McLaren started to use people in his films, rather than directly animating on film he was essentially capturing the performance, which becomes the site of this investigation.

McLaren was particularly interested in the concept of movement and suggested that the “basic substance of cinema is movement. At its lowest physical level, the movement of lightwaves (the visuals) and the movement of sound waves (the sound track)” (in Werner, 1993, p. 47). He wrote eloquently about the way in which movement could be broken down, as Cull describes, into tiny moments of motion. McLaren (1956) contends that

the mobile element of a film can almost always be broken down into two components, the form of the moving object, and the motion itself [...] It is the motion that is the heart of cinema, and that makes the film (as well as the more traditional arts of dance, ballet, pantomime, theatre etc.), such a powerful medium. An international language. (p.1)

***Neighbours* (1952)**

Once McLaren began to work with the body as his medium for motion, he started to investigate the potential for creating new and interesting movements. He wrote detailed technical notes on most of his films, but for *Neighbours* (1952) he discussed how he would manipulate both the camera speed and the actor’s speed to create the effects he achieved. He notes that this is not a new technology but was clearly very excited about what he saw as the “creative potentialities of this stop-motion live-action technique are quite considerable for a new genre of filmic ballet and mime” (McLaren 1952, p. 84). By using actors to perform in this way he talks of the “spectacular feats of virtuosity that this makes the actor capable of, it is possible to use the technique in a concealed way behind what appears to be normal acting.” (1952, p. 82).

Neighbours features two men for whom their garden boundaries become disputed, over the appearance of a new flower. They fight over the ownership of the land on which the flower is located, ultimately destroying both each other and the flower. The film was made as an anti-war film and won an Academy Award for Best Documentary (short subject) in 1952. This film was a departure from McLaren’s earlier abstract films, but his use of pixilation still gives the film a slightly abstract aesthetic. By examining the film using the components of performance much can be said about the complex nature of this animation.

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

Agency and Character

The agency of the actors is derived from both their own performance – they had to move at different speeds, often much slower than normal, in order to create the pixilation effect – demonstrating a skill which was intrinsic to the success of the film; as well as from McLaren as director – he was able to manipulate the camera and thus the output, enacting his own agency. We can look here at both the performances in and of animation to consider the whole outcome. Likewise, the flower is a character in its own right, but is entirely manipulated by McLaren and thus has no agency.

Movement

The movement of the characters in *Neighbours* has the uncanny feeling that pixilation can elicit. The men move in odd ways, which McLaren was keen to develop. According to McLaren, it is “possible to devise new ways for a human being to locomote” (1952, p. 82). Pixilation also confers a mathematic sensibility to the movement as it is achieved through the physics of the camera (as well as the body). We are shown some movements, but can be left wondering about the movements in between. And moreover, those movements can be said to defy physical laws, as noted by Cull (2009). In this film, McLaren becomes the choreographer or puppeteer, his direction creating the performance of animation.

In addition to the physical movement of the men and objects in the film, we can consider the movement of the music as part of the performance. In McLaren’s case, the music is created in the same way as his other animated music – created directly onto the film soundtrack to synchronise exactly with the movement on the screen. This rhythmic pattern of notes fits with the visual and becomes part of the entire performance both in and of the animation.

Audience/projection/place

In the case of *Neighbours* (and other historic works), the film has been seen by a variety of audiences in a variety of venues, from a cinema space on a big screen, on television via video or DVD technology, and perhaps most recently on iPhone via the NFB’s website. These variation thus present the potential for a variety of performances – the audience will perceive the performance depending on the context – are they seeing the pixilation for the first time? Do they know how the process was done? Would this be similar for the music? Are they familiar with McLaren’s work in general? These factors are all important to the notion of the performance and can be considered in each of his films, however for the purposes of this paper I am more concerned with the movement and notion of agency; this will be further explored in the next example.

A Chairy Tale (1957)

In this film, McLaren teams his human performer with an inanimate object made animate – the chair of the title. A man desires to sit and read a book, but the chair does not want to be sat upon. After what can be perceived to be a battle of wits, through a choreographed chase and ‘dance,’ the chair triumphs by sitting on the man. At the end of the film the chair allows the man to sit and read, the man having experienced what it is to be sat upon – a fable of co-operation again classified as anti-war in the National Film Board of Canada’s (NFB) collection. This film

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

also uses pixilation for much of the man's movement and the chair is animated by what might be termed traditional stop motion, but is also manipulated by wires in a fashion akin to puppetry. The setting is simple, with little discernable background or any other objects.

The music is again synchronised to the movement and becomes part of the performance. If we consider the same aspects of performance I have already outlined, there is again a combination of agency between the man (and his skilled movement) and the animator manipulating the movement, which is captured. More so than the flower, the chair inhabits a distinct character through the movements. We can sense an attitude, at times playful or rebellious as it refuses to conform to its presumed purpose and are drawn into its performance. As with *Neighbours*, McLaren is using the man and his body's movements to perform similarly to the chair – they are both equal characters. The agency, however, is ultimately McLaren's. Similarly, if we consider Cull's Deleuzian notion of puppetry, it becomes evident that the movement is created to essentially defy the laws of gravity – both in appearing to move itself and while running and leaping. It is these unusual movements that give the chair its character, and ultimately develop the performance.

It could be argued that *A Chairy Tale* is more of a conventional comedic chase narrative (although in *Neighbours* there is still the structural convention of a conflict being played out) but I would suggest that it is the combination of synchronised music as well as the combination of pixilation (which could be viewed by the untrained eye as live action) which makes the performance more interesting than if McLaren had say drawn a chair and man interacting in the same way. McLaren is able to use the body and the object together to present something that seems as 'real' as live action, but with the particularity of animation, and perhaps could be argued to be part of this new genre of ballet and mime that he desired. I would argue further that, while the examination of the movement in these two films can be considered the performance 'in' animation – in these cases McLaren's role, while essentially 'invisible' (Crafton 2013), is such that the performance 'of' animation must be considered important to the overall performance. More simply, McLaren is essentially performing the animation – not directly onto the film as in *Begone Dull Care*, but by manipulating the movement (as would a puppeteer) and carefully synchronising the soundtrack in such a way as to be considered part of the performance itself.

While these two examples use the body as a performative tool, the next two first capture the performance, and then use it to create the animation. This is true of McLaren's other films to a certain extent (the effects created through the animation process), but where their performance was created by animation, these two films contain performance first; 'in' animation.

***Pas De Deux* (1967) and *Narcisuss* (1983)**

Both *Pas De Deux* and *Narcisuss* feature a dance performance with multiple dancers – a pair in the former and three (four) in the latter. The animation is used to create a magical effect, which, in *Pas De Deux* makes the dancers appear almost multi-limbed and in *Narcisuss* allows the titular protagonist to dance with his ultimate lover, himself.

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

McLaren (1967) notes that in the “original shooting of *Pas de Deux* no attempt was made to get a multiple image” (p. 44). He explained further in his technical notes how the effects were achieved, by making multiple exposures of freeze-frame scenes. These were later combined with one another to make the effect of the multiplication of movement. Here, the dancers use their ability to exert their agency over the performance. Though McLaren is the choreographer, in a more traditional sense, it is not until post-production that the dancers become animated, and McLaren’s agency dominates the performance. I have already noted his interest in movement almost for the sake of movement, and moreover, that McLaren is interested in “how it moves [as much] as what moves” (Solomon 1987, p. 11). Recalling Cull on the motion between, these films perfectly demonstrate his emphasis on movement. By working from the performance outwards, McLaren is able to add a new element of movement to the performance. In these two films, he is using his agency and performance ‘of’ animation to enhance the performance ‘in’ animation.

This is similar in the much later work *Narcissus* (1983), about which McLaren (2006) said, “the Narcissus legend gave me the story to show off my techniques.” He had developed the multiplication technique used in *Pas de Deux* to the point that he wanted to use it in a much longer film. The film itself is slower to develop when compared to the energy of his earlier films, but when the animation begins the movement becomes more complete. Again, the performance is enhanced and is given a quality that the straight live action would lack. In this respect, *Narcissus* is perhaps the best example of McLaren’s work on movement and dance as a culmination of a series of films which represent what I will call ‘pure performance.’

‘pure performance and towards a conclusion’

In Crafton’s thorough examination of animated performance, he suggests that many early filmmakers used what he terms ‘re-performances,’ or, the repeated use of visual tropes with which the audience would become increasingly familiar. Crafton cites performance theorist Richard Schechner, who posits that all performances are essentially ‘restored performances;’ that is, nothing is new and everything is rehearsed in some aspect. According to Schechner, restored behaviour

is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted –even while that truth or sources is being honored and observed. (Schechner in Crafton 2013, p.33)

Though Crafton uses Schechner to demonstrate that his own examples can be constituted restored behaviour and thus ‘re-performances,’ I would suggest that we could develop this notion further for McLaren. In technical terms the performance itself is restored, therefore the filming and subsequent projections are thus re-re-performed – rehearsed and replayed. Since *Pas de Deux* and *Naricisuss* are both captured dance performances with multiple exposures layered over them, it is essentially re-performance – re-performed.

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

As I have suggested, McLaren, and to an extent all animators (as Crafton also posits), holds the agency over the performance of animation. As he is also creating the re-performance, re-performed, to what extent can we call McLaren the performer (beyond the notion of the puppeteer)? His hand is present in all aspects of his films, from visuals to sound. As such, he composes, choreographs and manipulates (his term) the overall result, which is perhaps the closest thing to what I would call ‘pure’ or ultimate performance.

The notion of ‘pure’ in performance theory is being truly spontaneous. According to Schechner, however, no performance is unrehearsed, and thus cannot be considered pure. That said, it can certainly be argued in McLaren’s case that the animator, performing all functions to create the performance of animation which features a literal performance in the animation, can then be considered a pure performance? This paper has considered the performative nature of McLaren and his films and is by no means intended to be conclusive, but rather is intended to further develop the notion of performance in animation.

[1] For a more in-depth perspective on this notion of realism, see Cholodenko (1991), Furniss (1998), Wells (1998).

Dr. Nichola Dobson is based in Edinburgh, lecturing part time at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. Founding editor of *Animation Studies* from 2006 until 2011 and founding editor of *Animation Studies 2.0* since its inception in March 2013. She has published on both animation studies and television, including *The A to Z of Animation and Cartoons* (2010) and *Historical Dictionary of Animation and Cartoons* (2009) for Scarecrow Press. She has published in anthologies on *Crime Scene Investigation* and *Life on Mars* as well as shorter works for the online journal *FLOW*. She is currently working on a book on TV animation with Paul Ward for Edinburgh University Press and a book on Scottish animator Norman McLaren. She began a new role as President of the Society for Animation Studies in autumn 2014.

References

Auslander, P. (2009) “Reactivation: Performance, Mediatization and the Present Moment.” In: Chatzichristodoulou, Jefferies, Zerihan (ed.) *Interfaces of Performance*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Auslander, P. (1997) *From acting to performance: essays in modernism and postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004) “Performative Arts and Gender Constitution.” In: Henry Bial (ed.) *The Performance Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Bial, H. (ed.) (2004) *The Performance Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Choldenko, A. (1991) *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*. Sydney: Power Publications.

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

- Crafton, D. (2013) *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cull, L. (ed.) (2009) *Deleuze and Performance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ivins-Hulley, L. (2008) "The Ontology of Performance in Stop Animation" *Animation Studies* (3): n.pag. Available from: <http://journal.animationstudies.org/laura-ivins-hulley-the-ontology-of-performance-in-stop-animation/>
- Floquet, P. (2011) "Actors in Sin City's Animated Fantasy: Avatars, Aliens, or Cinematic Dead-ends?" *Animation Studies* 6: n. pag. <http://journal.animationstudies.org/actors-in-sin-citys-animated-fantasy-avatars-aliens-or-cinematic-dead-ends/>
- Furniss, M. (1998) *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. Sydney: John Libbey & Company Limited.
- McLaren, N. (1949) "Technical Notes on *Begone Dull Care* (1949)." *Technical Notes by Norman McLaren* (1933-1984). Toronto: The National Film Board of Canada. Available from: http://www3.nfb.ca/archives_mclaren/notech/NT_EN.pdf
- McLaren, N. (1952) "Some Notes on Stop-Motion Live-Actor Technique." *Technical Notes by Norman McLaren* (1933-1984). Toronto: The National Film Board of Canada. Available from: http://www3.nfb.ca/archives_mclaren/notech/NT_EN.pdf
- McLaren, N. (1956) "Remarks to Aspen Music Festival." In Russett, R. and C. Starr (eds.) *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. Reprinted in *ASIFA* 15 (1): p. 1.
- McLaren, N. (1967) "Technical Notes on the Multiple Image Technique of *Pas de Deux* (1967)." *Technical Notes by Norman McLaren* (1933-1984). Toronto: The National Film Board of Canada. Available from: http://www3.nfb.ca/archives_mclaren/notech/NT_EN.pdf
- McLaren, N. (2006) *Norman McLaren: The Masters Edition*. [DVD] New York: Home Vision Entertainment.
- Solomon, C. (ed.) (1987) *The Art of the Animated Image: An Anthology*. Los Angeles: American Film Institute.
- Walden, K. (2008) "Double Take: Rotoscoping and the Processing of Performance." *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, 14: n.pag. Available from: <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2008/12/24/double-take-rotoscoping-and-the-processing-of-performance-%E2%80%93-kim-louise-walden/>

Animation Studies – Vol.10, 2015

Wells, P. (1998) *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge.

Werner, L. (1993) “Spontaneous Frames of Movement.” *Américas* 45 (5): p. 42-48.

© Nichola Dobson
Edited by Amy Ratelle